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THE NKUMU OF THE TUMBA

RITUAL CHIEFTAINSHIP ON THE MIDDLE CONGO

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THE tribes living around Lake Tumba, a lake some thirty-five miles long by twelve wide lying south of Lake Leopold II (approximately 2° 30' south latitude, and 18° east longitude) and draining into the Congo River at the confluence of the Ubangi, lack cohesion and show a considerable variety of customs and language. But they are known collectively as Tumba, the Government adaptation of the Native term Nimba. Most of them are found to the east of the lake, the whole group numbering perhaps little more than forty to fifty thousand at the present time, though there is evidence that the last twenty years have seen a great decrease in population. European occupation of this area goes back barely fifty years, Protestant missions having been established for almost the same length of time. The first mission post was established at Bolobo on the south-east shore of the lake, one of the villages of a group known as Bosaqinde. In pursuing this investigation particular attention has been given to the practices of this group, but mention is occasionally made where considerable differences have been found elsewhere.

The Tumba are agricultural, hunting, and fishing people. Their country is flat and swampy with dense forests, and there are many watercourses flowing into Lake Tumba. There are occasional small, low swampy plains, and one such area, more open, with quite wide stretches of prairie, is a haven of buffalo. The forests are fairly well supplied with game, and the swamps, streams, and lakes with fish. A heavy rainfall and no distinct dry season make agriculture reasonably easy and famine unknown. Every family has its plantation of manioc, the staple diet, which is supplemented by plantains and bananas. The people make their own tools, formerly smelting their own iron for this purpose, are fairly skilful at making dug-out canoes, engage in weaving mats and making nets out of split cane, and are efficient at pottery production.

The role of the nkumu in the socio-religious activities of the community is one of the most interesting features of Tumba life. As a result of European contact the ceremonies connected with the nkumu are rapidly disappearing, but it has been possible to collect considerable information from the older men and women among whom the details are still vividly remembered.* The following report refers to the period previous to European occupation and control, a time within the memory of a large number of people, but already sufficiently remote to become a matter of history before the lapse of many more years.

An understanding of the place of the nkumu among the Tumba requires a glance at the tribal organization. According to the people themselves, they migrated westward, and coming into these parts chose land for themselves. Among the several

* In My Children of the Forest, New York, 1929, the African F. Hulme has briefly outlined some of the forms of funeral observed among the nkumu of the district adjacent to that of the present study. These were detailed notes on, however, chiefly of a general character, and it is to be questioned that the approximate nature of the nkumu is to be ascertained from the notes in accuracy.